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### **A debate of the highest order**

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**Citation for published version:**

Martill, B & Rogstad, A 2024, 'A debate of the highest order: The Brexit referendum as second-order role contestation', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, vol. 20, no. 3, orae013, pp. 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orae013>

**Digital Object Identifier (DOI):**

[10.1093/fpa/orae013](https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orae013)

**Link:**

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

**Document Version:**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

**Published In:**

Foreign Policy Analysis

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# A Debate of the Highest Order: The Brexit Referendum as Second-Order Role Contestation

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The 2016 Brexit referendum reignited debate on the UK's international role. Yet the stakes were complex, since neither side challenged Britain's global leadership role or its strong ties with non-European partners. Research on role contestation has thus struggled to account for the politics of Brexit, focusing instead on non-role-based conflict. We argue that Brexit debates can be understood by reference to second-order role contestation where role compatibility itself is the subject of political disagreements, a phenomenon role theory scholarship has missed by studying role conflict and role contestation in isolation. We distinguish between inclusive and exclusive second-order conceptions, which capture the respective positions of the Leave and Remain campaigns regarding Britain's European role and its relation to other (shared) roles. Our argument shows that role conflict is often contested politically and that role contestation operates at higher levels of abstraction than conventionally acknowledged.

El referéndum sobre el Brexit, que tuvo lugar en 2016, reavivó el debate sobre el papel internacional que juega el Reino Unido. Sin embargo, el asunto resultaba complejo, ya que ninguna de las partes dudaba ni acerca del papel de liderazgo global por parte del Reino Unido ni acerca de sus fuertes lazos con socios no europeos. Por lo tanto, la investigación relativa a la impugnación de roles ha tenido dificultades para explicar la política del Brexit, centrándose, en cambio, en el conflicto no basado en roles. Argumentamos que los debates relativos al Brexit pueden entenderse con referencia a la impugnación de roles de segundo orden, donde la compatibilidad de los roles, en sí misma, es objeto de desacuerdos políticos. Los académicos especializados en la teoría de roles han pasado por alto este fenómeno ya que han estudiado tanto el conflicto de roles como la impugnación de roles de forma aislada. Diferenciamos entre concepciones

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*Author's note.* The authors would like to thank two anonymous reviewers and the editors of *Foreign Policy Analysis* for their comments and suggestions as well as Julie Kaarbo, Ryan Beasley, Marijke Breuning, Catarina Liberato, Consuelo Thiers, and Damian Strycharz for their feedback on an earlier version of the text. Earlier versions of this article were presented at the Foreign Policy Research Group at the University of Edinburgh, the 2023 International Studies Association Conference in Montreal, and the 2023 Council on European Studies Conference in Reykjavik.

Martill, Benjamin, and Adrian Rogstad. (2024) A Debate of the Highest Order: The Brexit Referendum as Second-Order Role Contestation. *Foreign Policy Analysis*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fpa/orae013>

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incluyentes y concepciones excluyentes de segundo orden, las cuales ilustran las posiciones respectivas de las campañas a favor de la salida de la UE y a favor de la permanencia en la UE con relación al papel del Reino Unido en Europa y a su relación con otros roles (compartidos). Nuestra hipótesis demuestra que existe, con frecuencia, una impugnación a nivel político del conflicto de roles y que la impugnación de roles puede operar a niveles más altos de abstracción de lo que convencionalmente se reconoce.

Le référendum du Brexit de 2016 a relancé les débats sur le rôle du Royaume-Uni à l'international. Pourtant, les enjeux étaient complexes, car ni l'un ni l'autre des côtés ne remettaient en question le rôle de leadership mondial du Royaume-Uni ou ses liens forts avec ses partenaires non européens. Aussi la recherche sur la contestation du rôle a-t-elle éprouvé quelque difficulté à expliquer la politique du Brexit, et s'est davantage concentrée sur les conflits qui ne se fondaient pas sur les rôles. Nous affirmons que les débats relatifs au Brexit s'appréhendent plus justement par référence à la contestation du rôle de second ordre, la compatibilité du rôle étant en elle-même l'objet de désaccords politiques, un phénomène que la recherche sur la théorie du rôle du phénomène a omis en étudiant le conflit de rôle et la contestation du rôle de façon isolée. Nous établissons une distinction entre les conceptions de second ordre inclusives et exclusives, qui représentent les positions respectives des campagnes Leave (sortir) et Remain (rester) quant au rôle du Royaume-Uni dans l'Europe et sa relation avec d'autres rôles (partagés). Notre propos montre que le conflit relatif au rôle fait souvent l'objet d'une contestation politique et que la contestation du rôle peut intervenir à des niveaux d'abstraction supérieurs à ceux auxquels on pense généralement.

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## Introduction

States frequently enact a number of different roles externally, often at the same time (Cantir and Kaarbo 2012, 9; Thies 2017). Mexico, for instance, has variously been an “American ally,” a “globalizer,” and a “bridge builder” (Wehner and Thies 2014, 429). Former Soviet Union states have seen themselves as “active independents” or “Western protectees” (Cantir and Kaarbo 2012, 14). China’s grand strategy under Xi Jinping comprises roles like “developer,” “regional leader,” and “internal developer” (Demirduzen and Thies 2021). The European Union (EU) has been a stabilizer of Western Europe, a manager of world trade (Hill 1993, 310–11), a promoter of normative/liberal values (Aggestam 2006), and a “great power manager” (McCourt and Glencross 2019). This multiplicity of roles and the interaction between them has underscored much role theoretic scholarship within foreign policy analysis (FPA). Research has focused in particular on the tendency for roles to conflict with one another (role *conflict* and/or role *dissonance*) (Brunner and Thies 2015; Wehner 2016; Breuning and Pechenina 2020) and the rise of disagreements over national role conceptions between domestic actors (role *contestation*) (Cantir and Kaarbo 2012; Wehner and Thies 2014; Kaarbo and Cantir 2017; Beasley and Kaarbo 2018, 2021).

In recent years, however, as increasing politicization has brought about greater contestation of roles among and between domestic groups (e.g., Cadier 2024), distinct forms of contestation have emerged that blur the lines between these different forms of role conflict. Increasingly, what is being contested is not which role(s) a state should prioritize, but how compatible with each other the roles in a state’s existing roster are. For example, Donald Trump claimed that the United States’ role as an institutional leader conflicted with its superpower status (Dimitrova 2017).

Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has claimed that Turkey's nascent European role was not compatible with its ability to act as a leader in the East (Hintz 2016), and pro-Brexit leaders in the United Kingdom argued that Britain's EU membership undermined its global credentials (Adler-Nissen, Galpin, and Rosamond 2017; Melhuish 2022). Meanwhile, their respective mainstream opponents claimed that these roles are precisely what facilitate the global significance of these states. This pattern of contestation, between what may be termed *inclusive* and *exclusive* conceptions of role compatibility, does not fit neatly within existing theoretical characterizations of role conflict, however. Contestation does not take place over roles themselves, but over the compatibility of existing roles, contra the assumptions of scholarship on role contestation. Dissonance—or role conflict—is not in these cases an objective phenomenon, but rather something actively constructed and contested by political actors.

In this article, we argue that examples of contestation over questions of role compatibility constitute *second-order role contestation*, a distinct form of politics that combines elements of both role conflict and role contestation and that requires its own theoretical apparatus to adequately comprehend. We illustrate this by examining debates over Britain's role in the world during the Brexit referendum campaign of 2016, which offers an instructive example of these dynamics, and the respective disciplinary blind spots. Drawing on material from the Leave and Remain campaigns collated by the Britain and Europe Archive at the London School of Economics, we show that the referendum debate pitted Remain-supporting *inclusive* arguments, which regarded European leadership as a complement to Britain's other roles, against the *exclusive* arguments of Leave supporters, which saw them as actively detrimental. While Leave supporters claimed that the EU "usurped" Britain's institutional roles, held back its global ambitions, and reduced the attention afforded the Commonwealth and the United States, Remain supporters argued that Britain's EU membership in fact reinforced its global influence and backed up its role in key institutions.

While existing research on role contestation and Brexit emphasizes the significance of non-role-based political contestation (e.g., McCourt 2021) and combinations of contestation over roles as well as sovereignty, power, and identity (Oppermann, Beasley, and Kaarbo 2020; Beasley, Kaarbo, and Oppermann 2021; Gibbins 2022), we argue that Brexit rather offers an example of second-order role conflict. By articulating a theoretical framework that combines insights from scholarship on role conflict and role contestation, we are able to better capture the nuances of the Brexit debate on Britain's role(s) in the world in a manner that avoids conceding too much to non-role-based components of the debate. The theoretical framework is also conceptually parsimonious, making it more amenable to easy transposition to other instances of contestation over role compatibility. Our argument proceeds as follows. First, we examine the respective claims of the Leave and Remain campaigns in detail, drawing on an empirical analysis of the referendum materials. Second, we discuss scholarship on role conflict and role contestation, setting out existing interpretations of the Brexit debate from these perspectives. Third, we articulate a theory of second-order role contestation to account for the positions in the Brexit referendum, spelling out inclusive, exclusive, and contingent positions on role compatibility. Finally, we discuss the implications of the conceptual framework in light of existing concepts in role theory.

### The Brexit Referendum: A Clash of Roles?

To understand what was at stake in pre-referendum claims regarding Britain's role in the world, it is necessary first to examine the debate itself. The announcement of the referendum made Britain's role in the world the subject of intense political contestation. While much of the campaign focused on supposedly domestic issues

such as immigration, identity, sovereignty, and the need to “take back control,” both the Leave and Remain campaigns articulated distinct visions of Britain’s place in the international order (Martill and Rogstad 2019). As will be demonstrated below, the Remain campaign claimed that Britain’s EU membership enhanced its reputation and influence abroad, enabled the United Kingdom to promote free trade and liberal values, and placed Britain at the center of international networks (Oppermann et al. 2020; Rogstad and Martill 2022). The Leave campaign emphasized Britain’s global credentials, the benefits of re-engaging with the Commonwealth (Namusoke 2016, 463; Dee and Smith 2017; Melhuish 2024), and building ties with partners in the Anglosphere (Vucetic 2011; Bell and Vucetic 2019). Leave supporters also stressed Britain’s need to be at the “top tables” (Hill 2023), to embrace an emergent global trading order (Siles-Brügge 2019; Egan and Webber 2023), and to focus strategically on NATO and the transatlantic connection with the United States (Oliver 2017, 523; Rees 2017, 565; Webber 2023).

Yet there existed significant commonalities across both camps. Both campaigns endorsed shared assumptions of Britain’s global relevance inherited from inaccurate or selective readings of imperial history (Saunders 2020). Both Leave and Remain sought to capitalize on global and also *regional* identities, including Britain’s role in Europe (Gibbins 2022), and both campaigns sought to emphasize the UK’s ostensible greatness as well as the significance of Britain’s myriad institutional memberships (Rogstad and Martill 2022). Moreover, any effort to locate the obverse of Leave claims is rendered difficult by the professed arguments of the Remain side that Britain’s EU membership made it *more* influential in the Commonwealth, more important to the United States, and bolstered its global credentials. On the flip side, while the Remain campaign placed considerable emphasis on the value of institutionalized cooperation, the Leave side claimed that withdrawal from the EU would allow the United Kingdom to increase its influence in other international institutions. Thus, both sides agreed on many of the roles that the United Kingdom should be playing, but they disagreed on the extent to which these were compatible with Britain’s role as a leader in the EU.

These claims did not arise out of nowhere. Both sides drew on a menu of established “role conceptions” for Britain, mixing and matching them in different ways. Since the end of the Second World War, the United Kingdom has either tried to play or been analyzed as playing several different roles, including those of a global strategic actor or “residual” great power (Morris 2011; Blagden 2019), a transatlantic bridge and faithful ally to the United States (Oliver 2017, 523; Rees 2017, 565; Turner 2019), a (responsible) nuclear power (Dee and Kienzle 2023), a broker between regions and organizations (Oliver 2020, 137), a lynchpin or champion of the liberal international order (Hadfield and Wright 2021, 3), a leader in the Commonwealth and in Europe (Hill 2018, 188; Hill 2023), and a balancer between Europe, America, and the Commonwealth (Hill 2018, 188; Oliver 2020, 137). In many instances, these roles are mutually reinforcing, such that performing one helps—or is seen to help with—performing another. Yet these various roles have also been the subject of contestation among domestic actors, especially at key junctures like the 1956 Suez Crisis, the 1968 “East of Suez” withdrawal, the 1975 referendum on Europe, and the 2003 Iraq War, during which times the role Britain plays in the world has become politicized (e.g., Strong 2015, 1125–6; Strong 2019).

The Brexit referendum represented a moment of politicization in which the relationship between the United Kingdom’s existing roles became the subject of high levels of contestation between different domestic actors. For this reason, studying the referendum campaign can tell us a lot about the conditions under which role compatibility becomes politicized, and what is at stake when this occurs. Helpfully, because referendums occasion significant public debate, there is a wealth of material associated with the positions of each side. The empirical material in this study comes from the Britain and Europe Archive at the London School of Economics,

which brings together 221 pamphlets, 83 representing Leave positions and 130 Remain, with 8 undeclared or neutral. For the analysis, we examined all the documents looking for mentions of foreign affairs and of Britain's role in the world. We then proceeded inductively to identify the main claims and arguments, focusing on the sub-set of mentions of foreign affairs and identifying the different positions of each campaign and what differentiated them from one another.

The reliance on campaign materials is a novelty in the role theory literature. It provides a productive empirical "site" because of the deliberate, public-facing discussion by political actors of a range of issues with both explicit and implicit consequences for the "roles" a country plays. This is especially true in the case of a referendum that explicitly deals with a foreign policy issue such as membership of an international organization and broader questions of the state's foreign policy orientation and place in the world (despite the caveats noted above about how the referendum focused a great deal on "domestic" issues). There are, of course, also potential drawbacks associated with the use of campaign materials. For example, political actors are trying to "sell" a certain version of the country to voters and as such may tailor their message to what they think voters want. However, this is only a problem if we are interested in what political actors "really" think, rather than their public positions. If, instead, we are interested precisely in the public contestation and negotiation of roles, campaign materials are appropriate sources.

Political campaigns also have an inherently relational component to them, with each side seeking not only to raise particular issues and introduce specific claims to appeal to citizens, but also to respond to claims raised by the other side. Because of this, issues do not arise exogenously and in line with prior beliefs, but are shaped by the ability of actors to frame issues and set the discursive agenda. We do not focus on these dynamics, as they speak to a distinct research question to our own, but we note their existence because it is still the case that such interactions may independently influence how role conceptions are presented. As they do not *determine* these conceptions, however, we do not feel such dynamics preclude analysis of role conceptions via referendum materials—rather, they constitute one of many dynamics related to the material that must be borne in mind.

In the analysis below, we first look at the Remain campaign, since this was closest to the status quo and the conventional wisdom in the foreign policy establishment, before discussing the Leave campaign. Our aim is to set out how Britain's role(s) featured in each campaign, prior to a detailed assessment of how this has been understood theoretically to date.

### *The Remain Campaign*

The Remain campaign argued that Britain's membership of the EU enhanced its ability to perform its other roles on the global stage. Opponents of Brexit claimed that EU membership enhanced the UK's claim to a global leadership role, strengthened ties with the United States and Commonwealth (and other key partners), and helped negotiate beneficial free-trade agreements. Britain's European role aided the performance of others by adding to Britain's clout and institutional influence, productively linking the EU to other actors via the United Kingdom, establishing productive divisions of labor, and facilitating the collective power of the member states. Thus, the Remain campaign did not diverge substantially from the Leave campaign on the importance of British leadership on the world stage nor its relationship with key extra-European partners, but rather articulated an inclusive conception of how these roles fitted with the UK's role as a leader in the EU.

The campaign claimed that Britain's international leadership was enhanced by membership of the EU, which not only constituted a prestigious organization in itself, but also afforded the United Kingdom a unique combination of relationships when combined with other memberships. The European Movement, a long-

standing pro-EU civil society organization, under the heading “Britain as a global power,” noted that “Britain is a member of more international organisations than any other country. We sit at all the top tables; UN, NATO, EU, Commonwealth, G8, IMF, World Bank, etc., and we are able to use our unique network to influence the course of world events,” subsequently asking whether, if “we leave the world’s most powerful economy” it would “damage our standing, reduce our influence?” ([European Movement 2016](#), 11). The Remain section of the Electoral Commission’s official pamphlet argued that “Britain is stronger, safer and better off in Europe” and claimed, under the heading “Stronger leadership on the world stage,” that EU membership involved “shaping our future by sitting at the top table” ([Electoral Commission 2016](#)). Under the banner “our place in the world,” the official Remain campaign claimed that “Britain’s influence in the world would be undermined if we left the EU,” noting that “leading diplomats warn that outside Europe we would lose influence around the world” ([Britain Stronger in Europe 2016b](#)). Labour’s pro-European movement claimed that “**Britain is more powerful in Europe**. Being in Europe helps make Britain a more powerful country” ([Labour In for Britain 2016](#), emphasis in original). Quoting singer Paloma Faith,<sup>1</sup> Labour claimed that “being part of the EU bolsters Britain’s leading role on the world stage. Let’s not become an outsider shouting from the wings” ([Britain Stronger in Europe 2016c](#)).

The Remain campaign also claimed that EU membership strengthened the UK’s relationship with extra-European partners, including the United States and the Commonwealth countries, which the Leave campaign claimed EU membership threatened. The [European Movement \(2016\)](#) claimed that Britain’s influence came from its unique position at the nexus of the UN, EU, Commonwealth, and NATO, highly evocative of Winston Churchill’s “concentric circles” vision, which imagined the United Kingdom at the center of overlapping spheres of regional influence. In the security domain in particular, they argued that the “countries of the European Union have enjoyed an unprecedented 71 years without a war—a whole life-time. The EU and NATO work together to keep the peace for us. EU economic sanctions brought Iran to the negotiating table and the signing of the nuclear weapons deal” ([European Movement 2016](#), 10). The Labour Party’s Stephen Kinnock argued similarly that

Churchill’s message is as true today as it was in 1948: Britain must always seek to engage politically, economically and institutionally with our American, European and Commonwealth allies, and we must remember that weakening ties with one circle will inevitably weaken ties with all. This was President Obama’s argument on his recent visit to the UK; he made it clear that Brexit would damage our national interests not least because it would weaken the trans-Atlantic alliance. ([Kinnock 2016](#))

It was frequently noted in the broader campaign debate that the United States and Commonwealth benefited from the UK’s position as a liberal market economy within the EU Single Market, while the United Kingdom benefited from its status as an interlocutor between these actors.

While the Leave campaign placed considerable emphasis on the need for an independent UK trade policy, the Remain campaign emphasized the importance of maintaining free trade via Britain’s membership of the EU, which the campaign argued was responsible for stronger deals that were more beneficial to the United Kingdom. Several pamphlets emphasized the importance of the EU’s own trade deals, since “being in Europe also means we benefit from free trade deals the EU has signed with over 50 countries around the world—helping UK businesses grow and create UK jobs” ([Britain Stronger in Europe 2016a](#)). Labour, meanwhile, argued that “Britain’s EU membership...Helps us to negotiate better deals with countries like the USA and China—that keeps prices down and helps British businesses

<sup>1</sup>The Remain campaign relied heavily on quotations from celebrities, to whom various campaign claims were attributed.

sell their products” ([Labour In for Britain 2016](#)). Thus, whereas Leave proponents regarded the “free” in free trade to refer to organizational autonomy and geographical openness, Remain supporters saw it as referring to the extent of the underlying deals negotiated.

The Remain campaign articulated an inclusive view of Britain’s European and other roles, which regarded EU membership as a facilitator of the UK’s international leadership role, its relationships with the United States and Commonwealth partners, and its status as a supporter of global free trade. Membership did this by facilitating collective power and regional roles constitutive of global ones, intensifying relations with other organizations, and contributing to an institutional web in which the United Kingdom constituted a central node. The victory of the Leave campaign meant that this inclusive vision of Britain’s EU membership carried little weight in policy circles, with subsequent rhetoric and policy favoring the claim that EU membership was damaging to Britain’s global role. The “Global Britain” discourse and its association with pro-Brexit constituencies downplayed the extent to which Remain supporters had sought precisely such a global vision—with strengthened US/Commonwealth ties to boot—working *through* EU membership.

### *The Leave Campaign*

The Leave campaign, on the other hand, argued that Britain’s EU membership prevented the United Kingdom from assuming its rightful role in international affairs and relegated the country to a regional role incompatible with its global aspirations. Advocates for Brexit emphasized the need for Britain to re-establish a role as a leading global player, re-gain autonomy in trade, and improve its relations with key players outside the EU, including the United States and Commonwealth. Britain’s European role, the campaign argued, had been inimical to Britain’s role as a global power, a free-trading nation, and a strong supporter of its transatlantic and Commonwealth ties. This, the campaign materials claimed, was down to various inhibiting factors associated with EU membership, including the resources devoted to the EU role, the Union’s subsumption of the United Kingdom within its own rules and procedures, the incompatibility of European and global identities, and the ability of other organizations to undertake functions claimed by the EU. Overall, the Leave campaign followed an exclusive conception of how the UK’s European and other roles interacted.

In terms of the UK’s global leadership, the Leave campaign argued that membership of the EU dented Britain’s autonomy and thus its ability to engage with extra-European partners. The Eurosceptic Bruges Group argued that Brexit would offer a “better vision for Britain’s future, in control of our own global affairs” ([Bruges Group 2016](#)), while Leave.EU claimed that it was an opportunity to build “stronger ties with the rest of the world” ([Leave.EU 2016b](#)). Although the campaign claimed membership of the top organizational tables was a positive, it argued that the EU had gradually come to take over the UK’s own role. One Leave.EU leaflet claimed that the EU “takes the UK’s place in many global bodies and overrules Britain in most of the others: climate change, the environment, and standards are just a few examples. Once freed from the EU’s gagging order, Britain will be able to capitalise on its enormous cultural, political, economic, scientific and business clout in global affairs” ([Leave.EU 2016a](#)). Another leaflet claimed if we “Vote Leave, we can have a friendlier relationship with the EU based on trade, as well as regain our seat on global bodies like the World Trade Organisation” ([Vote Leave 2016b](#)).

The campaign placed considerable focus on trade, since this is an area in which the EU’s exclusive competence prevents member states from engaging in parallel activities. Unlike the Remain campaign, which argued the EU’s heft as a trading bloc benefited Britain, the Leave campaign claimed that it prevented meaningful engagement with global and Commonwealth partners. Vote Leave claimed that EU



membership “means we currently have no trade deals with key allies such as Australia, New Zealand or the USA—or important growing economies like India, China or Brazil. Instead of making a deal which is best for the UK, we have to wait for 27 other countries to agree it” ([Vote Leave 2016a](#)). Arguably, the trade-based argument spoke to broader, geopolitical issues, however, and this is visible in the countries with which the United Kingdom could enhance relations with, which included “key allies like Australia or New Zealand, and growing economies like India, China or Brazil” ([Vote Leave 2016c](#)). The implication was, as stated forcefully in the Vote Leave material, that the United Kingdom would be “free to trade with the whole world” ([Vote Leave 2016c](#)), and not only with the European states. Significantly, and unlike the Remain campaign, EU membership was seen as detracting from the UK’s ability to assume a truly “global” economic role.

The Leave campaign also emphasized the substitutability of the EU as a security actor, claiming that it was NATO and the United States that had “kept the peace” in Europe since the 1950s and that EU security and defence initiatives directly undermined the Atlantic alliance. Unlike the Remain campaign, which claimed that the EU and NATO kept the peace “together,” one Leave pamphlet argued that it was a myth that “the EU has helped keep peace in Europe” and that “NATO deserves the credit for maintaining peace in Europe since 1949” ([Read 2016](#)). Tim Martin, Chairman of the Wetherspoon pub chain and an outspoken critic of the EU, claimed as “an implausible argument” the idea that “the EU helps to prevent war in Europe,” arguing that “democracy is the biggest protection against war [and]... [i]n any event, NATO, not the EU, is the alliance created to provide collective defence, and almost no one suggests we should leave NATO” ([Wetherspoon News 2016](#)). Discussion of the EU/NATO relationship also offered an opportunity for the Leave campaign to re-state their fear of an EU superstate with a European Army and to castigate the EU for its perceived failures in Bosnia and Ukraine ([Bellamy 2016](#); [Read 2016](#)).

The Leave campaign thus articulated a vision of Britain’s role in the world that regarded EU membership as inimical to the myriad roles the United Kingdom should be playing in international affairs. This exclusive position claimed that the EU constrained Britain’s ability to engage as a global actor and with key external partners, across areas such as trade, security, and governance. With the victory of the Leave campaign in the referendum, these ideas gradually found their way into the government’s rhetoric on Brexit, notably the “Global Britain” concept. They would also come to influence the direction of the UK’s post-Brexit foreign policy, especially under Boris Johnson, with its emphasis on a more autonomous relationship to EU policy areas, the search for alternatives to engagement with the EU, and highly visible trade and security agreements with global partners (such as the AUKUS agreement with the United States and Australia).

### **Role Theory and Brexit**

The Brexit referendum debate shows that both the Remain and Leave campaigns saw Britain’s role in the world differently. Moreover, there is an underlying consistency to the positions, with the materials echoing the same claims over time. Yet what is at stake in these conflicting views is quite difficult to interpret, as we will demonstrate in this section. Beginning with a discussion of role theory in FPA and how such scholarship has understood role conflict and role contestation, we show how existing views of the Brexit debate have struggled to articulate the kind of contestation taking place, leading ultimately to a rejection—at times a partial one—of the relevance of role contestation with regard to the Brexit case.

*Role Conflict and Role Contestation*

Role theory is based on the assumption that “human behavior, individually and collectively, is guided by roles,” with multiple roles “readily assigned to individuals, groups, and states” alongside corresponding expectations of appropriate behaviour (Breuning 2017, 5). Developed initially by sociologists and psychologists to understand the relational aspects of human behavior, role theory has long since been applied to questions of foreign policy (e.g., Holsti 1970; Walker 1987), and interest in the sub-field has grown rapidly in recent years (e.g., Harnisch, Frank, and Maull 2011; Thies and Breuning 2012; Wehner and Thies 2014; Brummer and Thies 2015; Cantir and Kaarbo 2016). Because states embody multiple roles at the same time, much role theory research has sought to engage with the implications of multiplicity in its various forms, especially regarding conflict over and between different roles (Thies 2017). Conceptually, role theoretical scholarship identifies two ways in which conflict—understood in its broadest sense—relates to the multiplicity of roles that states enact.

One way that conflict emerges is *between* the different roles held by actors, referred to as role *dissonance* (Breuning and Pechenina 2020) or role *conflict* (Brummer and Thies 2015, 276). The extent of dissonance between established roles can vary, with some roles directly clashing and some placing the enactment of other roles under “strain” (e.g., Wehner 2016, 65). Where *inter-role* conflict emerges, that is, where “the requirements and expectations of a role interfere with those of another role” (Thies and Wehner 2021, 6), leaders can adopt “role conflict resolution mechanisms” (Brummer and Thies 2015, 290) or jettison one of the roles (e.g., Tewes 1998, 120). Role conflict and role dissonance are not (usually) seen through the prism of domestic politics, which is the domain of role contestation, but it is acknowledged that domestic actors have a role in making salient examples of role conflict (Breuning and Pechenina 2020, 22).

The other form of conflict studied by role theory scholars emerges from divergent conceptions at the domestic level of what a state’s role *should* be, understood as role *contestation* (Cantir and Kaarbo 2012; Breuning 2013; Wehner and Thies 2014; Kaarbo and Cantir 2017; Beasley and Kaarbo 2018, 2021). Research has shown how roles are contested by a range of societal actors, including political parties and coalition partners (Cantir and Kaarbo 2012), leaders and elite actors (Wehner and Thies 2021; Vucetic 2022), constituencies of public opinion (Kaarbo and Cantir 2017), and ministries and government departments (Wehner 2016). Scholars distinguish between vertical and horizontal contestation, with the former focusing on conflict between publics and elites over a state’s foreign policy roles, and the latter describing conflict within and between different actors (e.g., ministries, political parties) (Cantir and Kaarbo 2012, 11–2) and between *inter-role* and *intra-role* conflict, depending on whether it is the role itself or the way in which the role is enacted that is at stake (Beasley et al. 2021).

*Applications to Brexit*

Role-theoretical perspectives have been applied to Brexit, although primarily to the post-referendum efforts to make sense of a new reality and the various role conflicts this brought about. Some studies of Brexit have sought to contrast the global role emphasized in the Leave campaign’s material with the Remain campaign’s emphasis on the status quo (Hill 2018). Scholars have also emphasized that alternatives to Britain’s pre-Brexit role might be found variously in a retreat into isolationism, a beefed-up Atlanticist role, or a renewed emphasis on the Commonwealth or the Anglosphere (e.g., Bell and Vucetic 2019; Oliver 2020). Yet while these works map onto some of the rhetoric deployed in the campaign, accounts of role contestation seeking to distinguish “European” or “regional” roles from “global” cannot portray

adequately what was at stake in the debate. This is because the Remain campaign was equally adamant that the United Kingdom should play a role as a global actor, Commonwealth leader, and committed Atlanticist, and that it should do so through its role as a European leader. In other words, research on role contestation which seeks to identify the specific roles at stake risks inadvertently buying into the Leave campaign's framing of the debate.

Some studies have focused on role performance and the dissonance between roles. For example, [Oppermann et al. \(2020\)](#) analyze the way in which the post-referendum May and Johnson governments sought to project a variety of roles, usually without much success owing to the reluctance of other international actors to recognize the UK's attempts to cast themselves in particular roles—one type of role conflict between “ego” and “alter.” In addition to this interactionist point, the authors point out that the different roles cast for—“great power, global trading state, leader of the Commonwealth, regional partner to the European Union, and faithful ally to the US”—were all “partially incompatible,” and argue that this is representative of the kind of role conflict that arises “when ego pursues two or more roles entailing contradictory behaviours” ([Oppermann et al. 2020](#), 133–6). However, this incompatibility or contradiction is not analyzed further. Our argument picks up from these points, but, as we have demonstrated above, we think the extent to which these roles are indeed incompatible is not something that can necessarily be objectively assessed but is rather actively debated between actors based on second-order assumptions.

Some approaches informed by role theory have engaged with allied concepts—including sovereignty, identity, and power—in order to explain the variation in positions underlying the Brexit debate. [Beasley et al. \(2021\)](#), for example, have argued that Brexit debates lie at the “sovereignty–role nexus,” comprising divergent “norms of sovereignty,” with Leave claiming that “more sovereignty would give the UK greater independence to play other substantive foreign policy roles” and Remain believing that the pooling of sovereignty enhanced capacities such that EU membership amplified UK capabilities ([Beasley et al. 2021](#), 4–5). Webber has similarly argued that Brexit was “the outcome of a particular interpretation of how British status was to be preserved,” premised as it was on the “assumption that continued EU membership had become inimical to British sovereignty and unnecessary for the articulation of the UK's identity as a global actor” ([Webber 2023](#), 6). Others have emphasized divergent interpretations of power. Gibbins claims that Brexit represents “a clash between global and regional UK roles revealing identity-based discord over the post-Brexit vision of its international relations” ([Gibbins 2022](#), 298), but notes that divergent interpretations of power lie behind much of the significant variation between both sides ([Gibbins 2022](#), 312).

Still others have argued that Brexit debates were not disagreements about roles at all, but rather represented non-role-based political competition, which had implications for the UK's ability to perform certain roles. [McCourt](#) has argued that Brexit debates exhibit “domestic contestation with important implications for role selection and performance, but which is not in the first instance over role selection” ([McCourt 2021](#), 178). Because “Brexit was not in the main about foreign policy,” its causes are “by and large left unaccounted for” in existing accounts, such that “Brexit was not, in short, a referendum on Britain's role or roles in world politics” ([McCourt 2021](#), 180). Non-role theoretical accounts similarly—if implicitly—also hue to this line. [Hill \(2018\)](#), for example, has argued that the underlying (non-role-based) debates surrounding the referendum have had implications for the UK's ability to perform its global role.

The difficulty of conceptualizing what is at stake in Brexit debates can be observed in these works. Traditional accounts of role contestation fare poorly because of the difficulty of identifying distinct roles that each side sought to reject. Both Leave and Remain supported Britain's global role and both stressed the importance of insti-

tutions, the Commonwealth, and a strong Anglo-American relationship. Combinations of role theory and allied concepts succeed in capturing more of the empirical variation, but they risk underplaying the analytical contribution of role theory and underestimating the extent to which role conceptions are at stake, all while embracing additional theoretical complexity. Non-role-based political explanations can capture important variation, but concede so much to alternative debates that they cannot account for the underlying politics of role conceptions observed in the debate, and arguably downplay the importance of public conceptions by seeing the referendum exclusively as a strategy in an intra-elite game. While the calling of the referendum certainly was in large part the outcome of political strategizing, once called, the debate itself became public.

Thus, research on role conflict and role contestation both get at different aspects of the Brexit referendum: role conflict at the perceived incompatibilities of roles according to the Leave campaign and role contestation at the underlying divergence in preferences. However, neither concept in itself holds sufficient explanatory leverage to explain what is effectively a *politics of role compatibility* at play in Brexit. The contestation taking place operates at a somewhat higher level of generality than studies of role contestation have hitherto acknowledged—i.e., focused on how compatible multiple roles are—while showing also the extent to which dissonance is contested domestically and thus far from an objectively discernible phenomenon. And while existing theoretical vocabularies allow us to understand the different elements of this process, the distinct logics of role dissonance and role contestation, coupled with the lack of cross-fertilization between these two fields of role theory research, have prevented us from theorizing precisely how this form of role conflict operates. To understand the politics of role compatibility, the next section elaborates the concept of *second-order role contestation*.

### Theorizing Second-Order Role Contestation

Our aim in the remainder of this article is to devise a conceptual framework that can explain the pattern of empirical variation in a manner that acknowledges the emphasis placed on Britain's role in the world in both sides of the debate. It is also our aim to do this in a manner that gives due regard to the relevant theoretical debates within role theory. This is not for the sake of it, but on the basis that role theoretical concepts will be relevant wherever political debates touch on roles, and that role theory itself will benefit from being able to explain complex instances of role contestation. The key to conceptualizing the pattern of role contestation, we claim, is to ask what was at stake in the debate. And as we hope to have shown in the sections above, Brexit was not a contest between two rival roles—regional vs. global or European vs. Atlanticist—but rather between different perspectives on the compatibility of Britain's European and other roles. In other words, Brexit debates evidence a politics of role compatibility, with discrete positions on the second-order debate concerning how—or whether—roles fit together. We propose that the best way to theorize this is not as non-role-based contestation, but rather as second-order role contestation.

Second-order role contestation offers a framework for capturing divergent positions on how roles relate to one another, bridging existing research on both role conflict and role contestation. We argue that role conflict is often a function of politics, insofar as domestic actors hold divergent positions on how compatible different constellations of roles are. That is, they disagree on *whether* and/or *how* existing roles and role enactments conflict with one another. Disagreement may concern only two roles, or may extend to larger sets of roles, and it might implicate distinct combinations of master or auxiliary roles. Whether domestic actors will disagree on role compatibility is a variable, not a constant, and depends on the polity in question and the roles involved. Our theorizing is informed by our inductive analysis of

the Brexit debates, but our aim is also to contribute to theory-building, on the basis that second-order role contestation is a broader phenomenon that might usefully be transposed to other cases.

We suggest that it is helpful to speak of three basic positions on second-order role contestation—*inclusive*, *contingent*, and *exclusive*—each of which contains within them various perspectives on how specific roles are held to relate to one another. We use these terms because they correspond to the terminology used to describe positions on the multiplicity of an allied concept, namely that of identity (e.g., [Rumelili 2004](#), 29; [Schraff and Sczepanski 2022](#)). These labels apply to specific constellations of roles, rather than to the entire set of national role conceptions, and can in practice be combined—that is, actors can hold inclusive conceptions in relation to one set of roles, but an exclusive view of others. The point is simply that actors have second-order positions on role compatibility that affect the first-order debate about specific roles and role enactments.

*Inclusive* positions see the performance of multiple roles as mutually reinforcing, since individual roles can contribute to the fulfillment of other roles through different means. Beyond roles simply being compatible, claims that combinations of roles are greater than the sum of their parts can be made on the basis (1) that multiple roles in different regions, organizations, and domains present opportunities for connecting roles in ways that provide arbitrage and networking opportunities, as is the case with “bridging” metaphors; (2) that multiple roles can reinforce one another, leading to a cumulative effect, as with roles as regional leaders or roles in specific organizations; (3) that roles can underpin and constitute one another, with broader roles built of constellations of other roles; and (4) that the maintenance of multiple roles can provide for greater choice and freedom over time in role performances. In the referendum campaign, the Remain campaign endorsed an inclusive position on the compatibility of Britain’s European and global roles, which were seen to reinforce one another, along the lines of the distinct logics spelled out above. For example, Britain’s role as a leader in the EU was held to enhance its global role by variously capitalizing on the collective weight of the EU member states, bolstering the UK’s role vis-à-vis the Commonwealth and the United States, comprising an additional seat at a major forum of international affairs, and offering the United Kingdom a choice of potential multilateral frameworks to utilize in its foreign policy.

*Contingent* positions see multiple role conceptions as more or less compatible at different times, or certain roles as dependent on others. Roles may be compatible under certain conditions, but not under others, such as when one role becomes preponderant and begins to encroach on the enactment of another. One example of a contingent role is illustrated by balancing metaphors, which see the contingent enactment of leadership and/or brokerage roles within different regions and organizations as part of a broader role as balancer or independent power. Another example of the contingent position is offered by hedging, where states enact multiple roles in part out of an expectation or fear that one or more of these roles will become redundant over time, and thus regard the roles not as mutually reinforcing but rather as potential substitutes. Gaullist designs on post-war French strategy illustrate contingent positions well, with rapid oscillation in France’s roles in NATO, in the then EC, and in relations with the Soviet Union aimed at establishing leverage within France’s broader roles as a European leader, great power, and partner of the West ([Martill 2019](#)). Because the binary nature of the referendum encouraged binary messaging, contingent positions are less identifiable in the debate, although it is worth noting that some arguments concerning Britain’s need to rebalance away from its European role evoked a more contingent approach to the UK’s role as a leader in Europe. The reason we make mention of the contingent position in spite of its empirical lack of relevance to Brexit is that it represents a significant sub-set of

possible second-order positions that are distinct from inclusive and exclusive ones and may be identified in less polarized political environments.

*Exclusive* conceptions see the enactment of multiple roles as incompatible with one another. This may be because they are directly contradictory or because the implications of parallel roles over time are understood to lead to highly divergent outcomes. Priorities often inform exclusive second-order role conceptions, since it may be argued that the pursuit of multiple roles leads either to incoherence or to the inability to fulfill other individual and potentially more important roles. Exclusive positions embody specific logics based on the ways roles may detract from one another, including (1) the incoherence that can stem from enacting multiple roles at once; (2) the inefficiency that can result from complex constellations of roles or from duplication; (3) the parochialism of roles that are perceived as beneath the status identity of states; (4) the sovereignty cost resulting from constraints—on rhetoric or policy—implied by specific roles; and (5) the extent to which enactment of one role can distract from the enactment of others. In the Brexit referendum, as we demonstrated, the Leave campaign’s argumentation embodied the exclusive position in several respects, notably by emphasizing the extent to which Britain’s European role rendered it merely a regional player, the risk of EU membership distracting from Atlanticist and Commonwealth relationships, the deleterious effects of constraints implied by membership—especially on trade policy—and the inefficiency of EU efforts to fulfill tasks better undertaken by NATO.

Where second-order role conceptions come from is a complex question. In some instances, the positions we have spelled out above are coterminous with master and meta-roles, such as “networker” and “balancer.” In other instances, they draw on non-role-based aspects of broader international worldviews. These include social phenomena such as identity, since actors may hold more or less inclusive conceptions of identity, with direct implications for the perceived ease of inhabiting multiple roles (e.g., [Rumelili 2004](#)). However, broader worldviews, ideologies, and “folk theories” are an important component too, with clear overlaps between realist worldviews and contingent/exclusive role conceptions—involving arbitrage and balancing—and between liberal worldviews and ideas of network centrality and inclusive role conceptions (e.g., [Martill and Rogstad 2019](#)). More pragmatically, the availability of resources—military, economic, and bureaucratic—can open up greater possibilities for actors to hold a multiplicity of roles without encountering trade-offs engendered by the unavailability of resources, attention, or capital. We believe that the label of second-order role contestation remains the most fitting, since these positions are directly implicated in the contest over which roles states should seek to play externally, as shown by the examples from the Brexit referendum. However, we caution that the distinct positions in second-order debates over roles are not always derived from roles themselves—master, meta, or otherwise.

### Implications of Second-Order Contestation

Having set out second-order role contestation as a framework for understanding the politics of role compatibility, this section considers the value-add of the second-order perspective vis-à-vis allied concepts and existing research on role contestation. We are sensitive to the risk of reinventing the wheel or disrupting the established lexicon by introducing new theoretical terminology, which constitutes a risk against which the value-add of any novel conceptual framework must be judged. Yet in clarifying the distinctions between the second-order approach and others, we hope to show that the distinction is about more than how existing concepts are labeled and that a focus on second-order contestation can add to existing concepts by exposing new fault lines and highlighting prospective areas for future research. Below, we briefly consider how second-order role contestation relates to (1) role conflict

and dissonance, (2) role contestation (and sub-variants), (3) master- and meta-role conceptions, and (4) role enactment and performance.

### *Role Conflict and Role Dissonance*

Research on role conflict and dissonance has focused on the ways in which multiple overlapping roles may come into conflict with one another, and the ways in which these conflicts are managed (Brunner and Thies 2015). This entails something of an objectivist approach in which conflict exists irrespective of partisan judgments, albeit that domestic actors have a role in making examples of conflict salient (Breuning and Pechenina 2020; Wehner and Thies 2021). Second-order role contestation examines instead how perceptions of role (in)compatibility come to structure debates over foreign policies. From a second-order perspective, role conflict is not (always) objective in the sense of clearly defined roles being clearly compatible or incompatible, but rather depends on prior worldviews and normative commitments, and is thus the subject of divergence and political contestation among actors. This claim does not seek to replace the (more) objectivist assumptions of role conflict research, but rather to add to them by noting that actors' perspectives on and framings of role conflict can be as important to outcomes as "real" underlying role conflict.

### *Role Contestation*

Second-order role contestation differs from first-order *inter*-role contestation on the basis of its higher order subject-matter; that is, it focuses on conflict between distinct conceptions of how roles relate to one another. Such second-order contestation can be both vertical and horizontal in nature (Cantir and Kaarbo 2012, 11–2) and is neutral as to the dominant pattern of contestation, since second-order contestation can occur in principle across any different actor relationships. Second-order contestation is not entirely distinct from first-order conceptions, since the political case for individual roles often involves an implicit assessment of how it might relate to other roles. Yet the distinction between these different kinds of positions remains instructive, and helps us to categorize such claims. When it comes to first-order *intra*-role contestation, the overlap is perhaps more evident, since contestation over *how* roles should be enacted invites consideration of which roles are commensurate with the role in question and *how* they contribute to its enactment. Yet second-order contestation is a broader category that takes as its subject positions that are broader than how any given role might be best performed, implicating multiple roles (e.g., networker, faithful ally, regional leader, etc.). Moreover, because second-order conceptions set out to explicitly theorize divergent positions, they can contribute to our understanding of the underlying variation in instances of inter-role contestation.

### *Master Roles and Meta-Roles*

Role theory scholarship distinguishes both "master roles" (e.g., Wehner 2015) and "meta-roles" (e.g., Chaban and Elgström 2021, 20) from the kinds of roles states can perform. Master roles are those defining "overarching positions in the international system" (Wehner 2015, 437) and thus roles that are of a higher order than "auxiliary" roles embedded within them (e.g., Wehner 2015; De Sá Guimarães and Maitino 2019). And a meta-role is a similarly "overarching role...which entails expectations of consistent and similar role behaviour across issue area or over time," as with the global interests of superpowers or the EU's normative power role (Sheahan et al. 2010, 352). Unlike second-order contestation, both master and meta-roles are prior only in terms of their significance and longevity, and do not pertain to a distinct conceptual level of theorizing. Yet individual roles such as "networker" and

“balancer,” which could be conceived of as either master or meta-roles, can also function as part of second-order contestation, insofar as they provide the basis for claims about the compatibility of multiple roles. Moreover, second-order contestation implies divergence on the relationship between roles, which is not implied by the existing concept of either meta or master roles. While the scholarship notes that master and auxiliary roles can be contested, the specific contribution of second-order contestation is to spell out the basis on which contestation takes place over the relation between auxiliary and master roles.

### *Role Performance and Role Enactment*

Research on role theory distinguishes between role conceptions and role performance or enactment, where the latter concepts refer to the ways in which actors embody the roles they seek to play on the international stage. This, then, raises the question of whether second-order contestation refers to role conceptions or role enactment. We would argue that second-order contestation is always over both, but that performance is ontologically prior, since all roles must be enacted or performed in some way in order to make them “roles.” As Oppermann et al. note, role conflict arises “when ego pursues two or more roles entailing contradictory *behaviours*” (2020, 136; emphasis added). It is thus not necessarily about the role itself but the *behavior the role requires*, which is contested. Thus, second-order role contestation in any given instance can focus on whether the role itself or its performance is more or less exclusive, inclusive, or contingent in relation to other roles, since the two are frequently inseparable in practice (most actors would not see a difference) and even, arguably, in theory. What differentiates second-order role contestation from existing accounts of contestation over how mutually agreed roles are performed is precisely the fact that second-order contestation implicates specific roles themselves on the basis of their relationship to other roles.

### **Conclusion**

Depictions of Britain’s role in the world after Brexit embody a fundamental tension that is evident in UK foreign policy more broadly, namely how to reconcile the extent of agreement on overarching principles and key relationships with the intense politicization of the EU and its impact on Britain’s role in the world. If both sides endorse “globality” and the UK’s institutional power, and if both seek to maintain and strengthen Atlantic and Commonwealth commitments, then what are they really arguing about? The key to understanding this puzzle is to acknowledge the second-order nature of the contestation. What is at stake is not the overarching roles the United Kingdom has played post-war, but rather the compatibility of EU membership and a European role with these other roles. Bringing together recent developments in role theory within FPA on role conflict and role contestation, we developed the concept of second-order role contestation to show how different interpretations of role compatibility produce forms of second-order contestation over the relationship between existing roles. Drawing on analysis of primary documents from the 2016 referendum on UK membership of the EU, we showed that while Eurosceptics and pro-Europeans endorsed the same role conceptions, Eurosceptics saw the “European” role represented by EU membership as detracting from these roles—an exclusive position—whereas pro-Europeans believed that it would enhance them—an inclusive position.

Empirically, our argument helps account for the complex politics of the Brexit referendum, characterized by intense disagreement over the European role but broad consensus on the United Kingdom’s other roles. By acknowledging the second-order nature of the debate, we are able to show why existing framings—like Atlanticist/European or Global/regional—have limited analytical purchase,



since they do not map onto the fault lines of political disagreement. This is valuable for its own sake, but also helpful in understanding how UK foreign policy has evolved in the years since the referendum, and what beliefs underpin recent changes in the UK's trade, security, development, and European policy (Whitman 2019; Heron and Siles-Brügge 2021; Vucetic 2022; Hadfield and Whitman 2023; Martill and Mesarovich 2024; Rogers 2024). Politically, our argument helps avoid unnecessary stereotyping of the other side in the (still salient) Brexit debate by emphasizing that Remain supporters never sought to challenge Britain's globality, Commonwealth connection, or "special relationship," and Leave supporters were equally cognizant of the need for Britain to be an institutional leader sitting at the "top tables." This not only lessens the risk of "straw-person" arguments, but highlights the risk of invertedly endorsing political claims, including those promoted by populist campaigns, which may seek to present broadly shared national goals as particular to their own campaign (e.g., as with Brexit and "globality").

Our argument also makes a broader empirical contribution to our understanding of the politics of national role conceptions in an era of politicization and populism. Post-Brexit Britain is but one instance of the wider phenomenon manifest in growing politicization of foreign policy and the rise in support for populist parties (Friedrichs 2021; Jenne 2021; Destradi, Plagemann, and Taş 2022; Cadier 2024). Broader instances of this phenomenon embody second-order role contestation well, especially where populists seek to challenge inclusive role conceptions that regard global influence as a product of institutional participation, dependability, and regional leadership credentials. Arguably such politics were at play in the foreign policy of the Trump administration in the United States (Friedrichs 2021) as well as in Erdoğan's Turkey (Destradi et al. 2022), Putin's Russia (Strycharz 2022), and in the foreign policies of the Eurosceptic movements in Italy, Germany, and France (Ostermann and Stahl 2022). At least in principle, second-order role contestation is not only a helpful way of understanding other country cases, but may also be better suited to understanding contemporary dynamics of contestation.

Theoretically, our argument contributes to ongoing efforts within FPA to understand patterns of domestic role contestation (e.g., Cantir and Kaarbo 2012; Brummer and Thies 2015) by demonstrating that even in cases where broad agreement on roles may be identified, forms of second-order contestation may be highly significant. Moreover, it also contributes to emerging research on role dissonance (e.g., Breuning and Pechenina 2020; Wehner and Thies 2021) by showing that compatibility is not just a question of salience, but also something that is constructed by political actors and actively contested among them. And, finally, we make a modest methodological contribution by showing the utility of referendum campaign material as a means of understanding how political actors construct the relationship between existing roles in selling their claims to the electorate.

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